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# The Effects of Distant Work During the Pandemic on Organizational Structure

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## ABSTRACT

The current business environment has witnessed a paradigm shift as organizations adopt remote work programs as mechanisms to keep operations. These phenomena call for restructuring of business strategies and agendas to fit the current working environment. Thus, against this backdrop, the purpose of this paper was to review literatures pertaining to distant work on organizational structure amid the pandemic and to outline a conceptual framework that could be verified and tested by future studies. By adopting a literature review perspective, the conclusions made by the paper was that distant work has led to structural changes of organizational designs as managers tends to adopt more of supportive leadership styles and participatory decision-making processes. Also, the environment has provided employees with high level of autonomy and benefits of balancing-work life activities. Nonetheless, its impact on productivity shows a negative direction as employees are bothered with family responsibilities while at home particularly those with children. Besides, the virtual space has weakened employees' collaborations and knowledge sharing levels as individuals tends to perform their tasks in isolation. As a practical implication, the correction of such situations requires managers devising programs and strategies that promotes employees' team spirit while working from home. Due to the nature of the study, the conclusions made by the study were not empirical tested. Thus, as relevant areas of interest, the study has outlined areas that could be look by future researchers.

*Keywords:* distant work, covid-19 pandemic, organizational structure, employees' productivity.

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# The Effects of Distant Work During the Pandemic on Organizational Structure

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## ABSTRACT

*The current business environment has witnessed a paradigm shift as organizations adopt remote work programs as mechanisms to keep operations. These phenomena call for restructuring of business strategies and agendas to fit the current working environment. Thus, against this backdrop, the purpose of this paper was to review literatures pertaining to distant work on organizational structure amid the pandemic and to outline a conceptual framework that could be verified and tested by future studies. By adopting a literature review perspective, the conclusions made by the paper was that distant work has led to structural changes of organizational designs as managers tends to adopt more of supportive leadership styles and participatory decision-making processes. Also, the environment has provided employees with high level of autonomy and benefits of balancing-work life activities. Nonetheless, its impact on productivity shows a negative direction as employees are bothered with family responsibilities while at home particularly those with children. Besides, the virtual space has weakened employees' collaborations and knowledge sharing levels as individuals tends to perform their tasks in isolation. As a practical implication, the correction of such situations requires managers devising programs and strategies that promotes employees' team spirit while working from home. Due to the nature of the study, the conclusions made by the study were not empirical tested. Thus, as relevant areas of interest, the study has outlined areas that could be look by future researchers.*

**Keyword:** distant work, covid-19 pandemic, organizational structure, employees' productivity.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic as a global alarm started in Wuhan, China in the late 2019 (Bai et al., 2020). Observing the far-negative impacts of the pandemic, international organizations like IMF declared a global pandemic which is believed to be more severe than the global financial crisis observed 2007-2008. Since start of the pandemic in 2019, it has claimed millions of lives, disrupted business operations, and melted down economies around the world. However, as strategies to curb the control the spread of the virus, governments around the world have launched lockdowns and "stay at home" campaigns leading to temporary closure of businesses and even the running out of some businesses in certain industries. More so, the antecedent of disruption in business operations leads to shrink in financial positions of businesses around the globe. Nonetheless, at the beginning of the pandemic, some firms has initiated work from home (WFH) programs as means of continuing their business operations (Bai et al., 2020), (Biron et al., 2021); (Gibbs et al., 2021). Besides, the shift to digital space as means of business continuation has led to restructuring of organizations' structures (Perone, 2021), improved employees' work-life balance, flexibility in working hours, and the possibility of safeguarding employees from the virus (Acker et al., 2020); (Sharma et al., 2020). Moreover, to overcome the challenges of employees' need to balance their work-life activities, and the associated factors of high levels of absentee and ineffective performances, businesses have adopted the flexible working arrangements as part of their operational policies (A. Egole, I. Stella, 2020).

Further, as with all forms of business, changes in organizational structures of multinational companies is found to be at its peak (Sobotkiewicz, 2021). In addition, changes in organizational structures due to the pandemic has led to holistic integration of human resource issues to the strategic agendas of firms (KANKAEW et al., 2021). Besides, human resources are now viewed as more viable assets to firms than ever before. More so, as noticeably observed companies are utilizing WFH programs as more of their short-term strategies with the anticipation of adopting a hybrid work model in the future. Thus from this angle we can understand WFH as concessional agreement of which employees are allowed to perform their work duties while staying at home through the use of digital platforms (International Labour Organization, 2020). Based on statistics, 90% of businesses around the world are utilizing the WFH policy. At European union level, this figure was observed to be 5% before the pandemic (Acker et al., 2020). Nonetheless, the adoption of agile business operations by organizations during this pandemic has resulted in less hierarchy and bureaucracy in organizations. The prevailing conditions are more of innovative and supportive systems that untapped the potentials of employees at all level (BİÇER, 2021).

Similarly, the digitalization of operational activities was also observed in the education sector as physical classrooms has moved to e-learning platforms (Zawacki-Richter, 2021). With implemented lockdowns, 85% of universities in Europe were found to adopt the e-learning platforms. Thus, conclusively, it can be said that the pandemic has led to digital transformation of learning. More so, the widely adopted online platforms by businesses and organizations during this period includes Zoom, WeChat, Microsoft Teams, Skype and many others that facilitate easy transmission of documents and information with the possibility of conducting video conferences and meetings among colleagues and business partners (Acker et al., 2020). Thus, by adopting a literature review perspective, the current study aims to conduct a holistic literature review of distant work which is better known as working

from home on organizational structures amid the covid-19 pandemic and to outline a conceptual model that could be evaluated by future studies while providing avenues that future researchers could investigate. Thus, the paper is structured as follows: The first section is about the introduction of the paper, follow by a section on literature review, under this section, a case study of the software industry is included together with a theoretical framework a conceptual model. The final section of the paper is about general conclusions and directions to future studies.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

With the pandemic, the traditional design system of organizations have been altered as business shift to the online platforms (Matriano, 2021); (Seker & Korkut, 2020). One the reasons for such actions were to counter the challenges that might arise from the pandemic that can hinder their business operations. As outlined by (Barbu et al., 2021), the pandemic has led to radical changes in business activities and operations around the world. Further, the response strategies adopted by organizations was the adoption of flexible working schedules and incorporation of policies that focuses on issues related to human resources management and development (Biron et al., 2021). To add on, digital communications is now being found as the new form of communication in businesses (Nobrega et al., 2021). This could partly be understood as organizations usage of information system (MIS) tools in formulation of strategic decisions. Now the prominent question being asked is whether all types of jobs could be conducted remotely? As indicated in literature, not all forms of jobs could be arrange remotely as some jobs requires the presents of the employees in the physical environment of the business (International Labour Organization, 2020); (Bai et al., 2020). A prominent example could be those in the assemble line of factories.

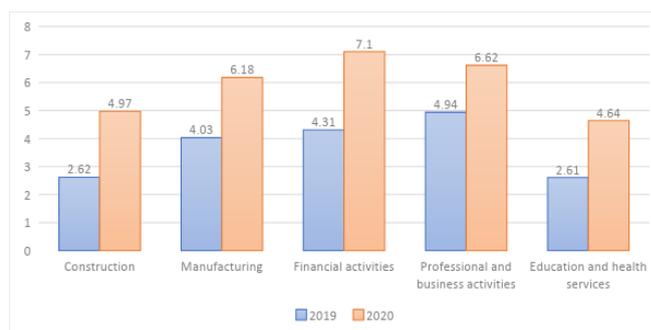
Notwithstanding, the studies of Sobotkiewicz, (2021) shows changes in organizational structures of subsidiaries of multinational companies as they adopt strategies aiming to increase their sales volumes and to be responsive to the external environment. Also, findings has indicated changes

in management strategies of hospitals as their utilize more of telephone and online platforms for their activities (Verhoeven et al., 2020). Thus, we can understand digital transformation of business activities as not only the adoption of digital tools but also the redesign and restructuring of work activities and processes (Selimović et al., 2021). Further as indicated in literature, digital transformation helps to ignite the spirit of collaboration and integration among functional units of an organization (Selimović et al., 2021). Although, there exist mixed findings as to the benefits of working from home or the digitalization of business operations on employees' productivity and performances.

According to the survey conducted by International Labour Organization, (2020), working from home hinders employees productivity especially those with children whose responsibilities not only stop in the work they perform but also their need to take care of family members while working from home. Similarly by conducting a study on Asian IT service companies, the findings of (Gibbs et al., 2021) indicates that women with children are more associated with decline in productivity despite increments in their working hours. Their study further indicates a total decline in employees' productivity of about 8-19% despite an overall increase in their working hours. However, the studies of BİÇER, (2021) indicates a different findings and shows that banks that quickly adopted the digital transformation systems were more efficient with higher performance records than their rivals in the industry. Similarly by using a difference-in-difference approach, the findings of (Bai et al., 2020) provides support that firms with pre-pandemic working from home index values gained more significant performances in terms of sales volume, net revenue, and return on their stocks than those without prior working from home plans before the pandemic.

Further, based on the survey conducted by the United States Department of Labor on the average hours spent by workers while working from home between 2019-2020, based on selected sectors in the industry, it was observed that the financial sector has the highest level of employees' average

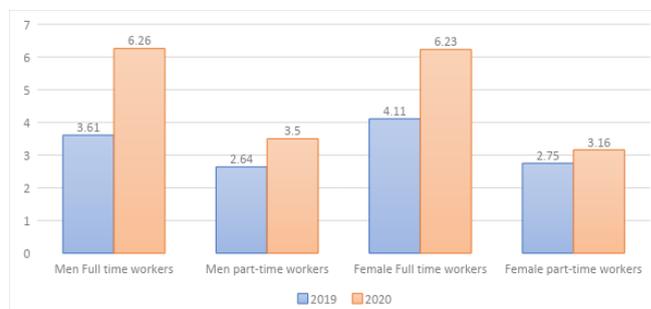
working hours while at home in 2020 with an average working hour of 7.1 as compared to the same period in 2019. As shown in the fig. 1 below, the professional and business sector was observed to be the second sector with the highest level of employees' average working hours by staying at home. Thus, conclusively, it could be said that the digitalization of work processes and the adoption of remote working was widely applicable in the service industry of the United States.



Source of data: Bureau of Labor Statistics, (2021)

Figure 1: Average hours of employees working from home on daily basis based on sector

Nonetheless, as depicted in figure 2 below, based on gender and job status, it could be observed that men with full-time employment have the highest average working hours while working from home in 2020 than their men counterparts with part-time jobs. Also, surprisingly it could be seen that the average working hours of female with remote working schedule is lower than that of men during the same period. Although their average working hours is higher in 2020 compared to in 2019.



Source of data: Bureau of Labor Statistics, (2021)

Figure 2: Average working hours spent by employees while working from home based on gender and job status

### III. CASE OF THE SOFTWARE INDUSTRY

As with other industries, the COVID-19 pandemic has also exerted negative spill over effects on companies in the software industry. Although it could be observed that the pandemic has improved the digital balance sheets of these companies as they come with innovative software and programs that aid business functioning and social networking. The intervention of software companies in aiding individuals and organizations to counter some of the challenges posed by the pandemic is also well documented. However, due to precautionary and safety measures, the pandemic has led to massive shift of information workers to remote working environments (Yang et al., 2021). Besides, the outbreak of the pandemic has led to software companies like Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft to incorporate hybrid working models in their organizational designs (Pattnaik & Jena, 2020); (Prothit et al., 2021). Further, as one of the giant players in the software industry, with the onset of the pandemic, Microsoft initiated more than 50 projects within its company to evaluate and examine employees' behavioural changes and the consequences of remote working programs on their experiences (Gatlin-keener & Lunsford, 2021); (Teevan J. et al., 2021).

Further, there exist mixed findings by researchers on the impact of remote working on employees' productivity and performances. As shown in a study commissioned by Boston Consulting Group, remote working indicates of more than 40% increment in employees' productivity with sharp decline in overall overhead costs of the investigated companies (Ferreira et al., 2020). The findings of the study further indicate an improvement in employees' work benefits. Similarly, according the report released by IBM, digitalization of works processes significantly contributed to the efficiency level of functional units of the company (IBM, 2021). However, on the other side of the spectrum, apart of the challenges of building trust and transparency in terms of data security (Prothit et al., 2021), there exist concerns on the side of managers in monitoring and controlling the behaviours of employees while working from home and also to

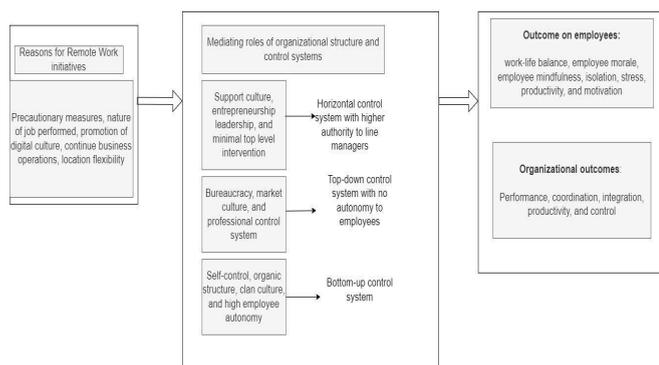
reinforce team spirit among them (Errichiello & Pianese, 2016). Further, findings has indicated a reduction in employees' cognitive actions as teams works and collaboration weakens among them (Sharma et al., 2020). Such circumstances lead to their feeling of loneliness and at times emotional exhaustion. Besides, employees lack of technical know-how in operating some of the tools designed to aid their work operations at home also calls for a concern (Ferreira et al., 2020).

More so, with the aims of evaluating remote work on employees' collaborations and communication, the findings of (Yang et al., 2021) shows a decline in collaboration and integration of employees of Microsoft. In a similar studies, communication and collaborations during meetings were further found to be at a downside in Microsoft (Teevan, J. et al., 2021), to certain degree affects their creativity performances. Despite these situations, the study further indicates general increment of the level of meetings held in the company during the pandemic. However, with regards to decision-making processes, it was observed that the company utilized more of participatory decision-making processes. Thus, with the associated benefits and challenges associated with remote working, it was suggested by (Ferreira et al., 2020) for managers to design comprehensive programs that best fits the future hybrid work environments. In support to this, it is necessary for managers to adopt leadership styles that fits the current environment.

### IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CONCEPTUAL MODEL DEVELOPMENT

For the past few decades, the field of organization studies witnesses a high growing number of theories surrounding working from home and the achievement of effective virtual communication in businesses. The Media Synchronicity theory (MST) as one of the widely most cited theories in literature in terms of collaboration as antecedent of virtual communication recognizes the importance of utilization of lower synchronicity as supportive mechanisms to effective communication when work activities are being performed online (Dennis et al., 2008). However, the social information processing theory (SIPT)

underlines the ineffectiveness of virtual communication because of the impossibility of using physical cues during communication which might impede the understanding of the receiver (Madlock, 1970); (Walther, 2015). The presumption of the theory is that telecommuting environment might not provide effective communication between employees and their leaders. Nonetheless, by building on the model of (Errichiello & Pianese, 2016) on the concepts of organizational control and remote work arrangements, through the mediation roles of organizational structure and control systems, this current paper outlines factors to the adoption of remote working by organizations and its outcomes on employees and the organization as a whole. As shown the diagram below, the model recognizes the significant of leadership styles and organizational culture on effective implementations of remote work arrangements.



*Adopted from: Errichiello & Pianese, (2016)*

**Figure 3:** Organizational structure and control systems as mediators between remote work implementation and its outcomes

Further, with modification to their model, new dimensions have been added to the current model considering factors that might arise from remote working during this period based on literature. As widely recognized in literature, safety and protecting of workers' health are part of the important factors to organizations adoption of remote working during this pandemic. Aside from the that, the need for continuation of business operations coupled with enhancement of digital culture of firms, the possibility of shifting some jobs online and its associated benefits are

recognized by the model as factors that induced organizations' remote working implementations. Besides, organizational structure and control mechanisms are proposed by the model as factors that can lead to successful or unsuccessful implementation of remote work on employees' and the organization. Thus, based on literature, remote work could have positive impact on employees' work-life balance, morale, mindfulness, productivity, and motivation provided it is device based on a structure that promotes these outcomes. Thus, as suggested by (Pattnaik & Jena, 2020), the current business conditions warrants the executions of employees' mindful practices as means of improvement in their morale which is believed to yield higher productivity.

However, a poorly implemented of remote work program that lacks supportive tools from management and the design systems of the organization that leads to their experience of work stress and isolation in turn could hinder their performances. Since individuals perform well when they are associated with groups than when they are isolated as indicated by the social identity theory (SIT) (Allen et al., 2003). This is further supported by the findings of (Feldman & Gainey, 1997) of employees' social belonging contributing to their effective job performances. Nonetheless, at organizational level, an effective design structure could yield high performance outcomes from employees and could enhance the level of coordination and integration of activities in the organization. The bottom line of such actions will lead to an improvement of both the financial and non-financial performances of organizations despite the setbacks of the pandemic.

## V. GENERAL CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS TO FUTURE STUDIES

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impeded business activities around the world leading to disequilibrium of demand of goods and services. Its effects are observed to extend to structural designs and functioning of business operations around the globe. More so, examining the impacts of remote working and organizational effectiveness provides a mixed findings by

researchers. With existing literature, its impact on employees indicates more positive insights as work schedules and activities become more flexible coupled with the benefits of merging work- life activities. However, it could be observed that the traditional leadership styles have been challenged by current business environment. Some of the previous theories on leadership like theory X of McGregor which recognizes the application of punishment and close monitoring of employees to ripe the best of them (Bedeian, 2011) might not be applicable in current digital working environments. Thus, as suggested by the current paper, the control mechanisms of managers should be centred on building trust among the employees and providing them avenues of which they can explore their skills and talents while working from home. Although, it could be observed from the review that the control systems of organizations to be more supportive during this period (BIÇER, 2021). Overall, it could be observed that the pandemic has led to structural shift of organization designs and functioning. Further, based on the review, the application of remote working is mainly applied to service sectors than to manufacturing and construction sectors.

Further, by conducting a systematic review on the impact of distant work on organizational structure during this pandemic, the paper contributes to literature by outlining a conceptual model of the application of remote work which recognizes the mediating roles of organizational structure and control systems on the effectiveness of remote work on employees and the organization that could be verified and tested by future studies. Thus, the study suggests for future researchers to evaluate and examine the impact of digital culture on employees' job engagement and motivation during the pandemic. Also, by examining the mediating roles of control systems, it would be relevant for future studies to investigate leaders' leadership styles on employees' job cognitive and productivity. Nonetheless, most of the studies done so far are mainly focused on influencing roles of remote working on employees' psychological beings and productivity leaving a gap on the side of managers on how it affected their leadership capabilities. Thus, it would be

relevant to investigate the readiness of managers based on their technical capabilities to influence the behaviours of their employees in the virtual workplace. More so, as shown by the review, most of the studies done on the topic are mostly based on developed and emerging economies leaving a huge gap on the side of developing countries. Hence, by observing the challenges of technological infrastructure in developing countries, studies could be done to examine the effectiveness of remote base working programs in those countries and its impact on employees' performances.

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